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OPTICS

Why People Flee Honduras

Immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border are hoping to leave behind a home devastated by poverty, gangs and crime, and widespread violence against women.

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Hundreds and sometimes thousands at a time, Honduran migrants have joined caravans of Central Americans making their way north through Mexico to seek refuge in the United States. They arrive at the southern border only to face stricter asylum rules from an administration increasingly hostile to their entry. There are a number of reasons people may choose to flee their country, and when they do, it's not an easy endeavor. Yet, they keep coming because of what they're hoping to leave behind.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Two-thirds of its roughly 9 million people live in poverty, according to the World Bank, and in rural areas, 1 in 5 lives in extreme poverty. With a growing population, combined with high underemployment and limited job opportunities because of a largely agricultural economy, many Hondurans seek opportunity elsewhere. And many who stay are dependent on remittances.

Honduras is one of the deadliest countries in the world and has one of the highest impunity rates. According to an analysis by InSight Crime, gang membership and activity have been on the rise in the past two decades, and the associated violence has hit the country's urban areas the hardest. Extortion by gangs has forced many to flee in search of more security. Moreover, the Honduran police are both understaffed—in the northern district of San Pedro Sula, home to nearly 230,000 people and where well-known gangs like Barrio 18 and MS-13 operate, just 50 police officers watch over its 189 neighborhoods—and plagued by corruption and abuse.

Violence—particularly domestic and sexual violence—in Honduras has taken or forever changed many women's and girls' lives. Gender-based violence is the second-leading cause of death for women of reproductive age. And in a country where emergency contraception and abortion are banned, even for rape victims, survivors of sexual violence have few options if they become pregnant. They can seek to terminate the pregnancy and risk prison time, or they can go through with it and face one of the highest maternal mortality rates in Latin America. As Jill Filipovic reports for POLITICO MAGAZINE, for Honduran women, economic instability and physical insecurity are intertwined, and both are exacerbated by long-standing patriarchal social norms in the country.

Almost 1,000 people gathered at the bus terminal in San Pedro Sula, after news of a new migrant caravan spread in April, one of several from Central America since late last year.

The migrants travel the over 3,000-mile distance to the U.S. border in large groups for safety to avoid being robbed, kidnapped or killed by gangs on the way.